

Polyamory...What?

Among many feminist theorists, monogamy is considered to be a factor contributing to gender inequality. Consequently, non-monogamous relationships are gaining popularity within queer, feminist and anti-authoritarian lifestyles. The most popular non-monogamous relationship model is known as “polyamory,” which means “many loves.”

Within the context of monogamy as the single normalized possibility for acceptable intimate relationships (“mononormativity”), any form of non-monogamy is usually considered “cheating” or “infidelity.” Distinguished from the concept of “infidelity,” polyamory emphasizes communication, honesty and trust as key principles of an intimate relationship(s). Polyamory, according to Wikipedia, “is the desire, practice or acceptance of having more than one loving, intimate relationship at a time with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved.”

Polyamorous relationships come in many different shapes and sizes. “Hierarchical” polyamorous relationships consist of a couple in which partners can have “secondary” or “tertiary” relationships outside of their “primary” relationship. Different relationships are prioritized to different degrees, in different ways and for different reasons. Non-hierarchical polyamorous relationships consist of various partners, all of whom have equal priority to each other. Multiple couples, triads (three mutual partners), quads (four mutual partners), polymarriages and polyfamilies are a few examples of different styles of polyamory, whether hierarchical or non-hierarchical.

Why would someone choose to have a non-monogamous relationship? According to a Dec. 4, 2008 blog by “Minerva,” claiming whether monogamy is among the root causes of female oppression and whether relative gender equality existed before the widespread establishment of monogamy are difficult and controversial issues in gender studies.

Some people suggest the notion of “ownership” is one of the major problems with monogamous relationships. “What irritates me the most is the notion that you OWN someone or someone is YOURS in monogamous relationships,” said Anonymous. “Human beings are not objects or assets or

commodities that you can claim, but monogamy makes people to think like that.”

According to Judith Stelbourn, editor of *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader*, monogamous relationships often fail through “the expectancy for one person to fulfill every single need that you have.” When someone can’t satisfy enough needs with one person, they often try to practice non-monogamy in secret, which is known as “cheating,” said Stelbourn in an interview on *Gender Talk*, Sept. 20, 1999. “The statistics show that very few people are actually monogamous in a relationship,” said Stelbourn.

Gender relations and female status within monogamy is a consistent point of criticism from polyamorists. “In Korean society, the laws, ethics and morality of monogamy are imposed upon both men and women but there are various parts which oppress women more than men,” said Ina Seo of the Korean Women’s Environmental Network. According to Seo, “modesty” and “faithfulness” are gendered norms that only women are expected to follow, whereas men are allowed more sexual freedom within monogamy. Within monogamous relationships, it’s often accepted for men to have more partners than one single wife, said Seo. “It’s structural oppression to women who are in these relationships.”

Seo also said that having a monogamous relationship changes a person’s identity, which can feel dehumanizing. Rather than an independent individual, a woman in a monogamous relationship might be identified as someone’s girlfriend or wife, said Seo. Monogamy implies “that you are not a whole person able to move on your own, but that you’re half of something,” said Stelbourn.

According to Seo, non-monogamous relationships can allow people to be fully recognized for individuality without needing to refer to their partner as part of their identity. “Polyamory is very constructive for making me more autonomous and independent from my partners and I can feel more natural when I’m meeting people,” said Seo.

Practitioners of polyamory insist that monogamy is not a natural social phenomena, but something that is socially normalized as the only acceptable style of intimacy which is related to the normalization of female marginalization, alienation and oppression. “I accepted monogamous

relationships as the norm and it's directly related to the traditional norms for women...modesty and faithfulness are regarded as norms or as the right thing for women to do," said Seo. "Monogamy does not have anything to do with human nature...it is a social practice that I don't want to be a part of," said Anonymous. Polyamory "allows us to question traditional definitions of fidelity, family and intimacy," said Stelboun. "Should we define fidelity, for women, within the restrictive male definitions of sexuality?"

Although polyamory is different from monogamy, many practitioners of polyamory find it difficult to abandon emotions that have been constructed by mononormativity. "Jealousy does not exist in most healthy polyamorous relationships because you get jealous when you don't know who the third or the fourth person is or what your partner is doing with them," said Zo. "We have to deal with those feelings of jealousy, possessiveness, control, privacy...everything has to be looked at from a new perspective," said Stelboun. According to Zo, honest communication and establishing familiarity between all partners is a reliable strategy for overcoming jealousy in polyamorous relationships.

Seo said that the current social unacceptability of polyamory within Korean society can be a major obstacle for sustaining a polyamorous relationship. "It's difficult to find people who understand polyamory in Korean society," said Seo. "It depends on people around me who know and accept the idea of a polyamorous relationship."